

Epicurean Views of "Teleology"

Post by "Joshua" of March 13, 2025 at 8:56 PM

Admin Edit: This thread was split off from a discussion of a book by John Masson on atomism

Quote

The habit of constantly explaining natural phenomena by final causes induces, as Lord Bacon says of Plato and Aristotle, ' a neglect in searching after physical causes.'

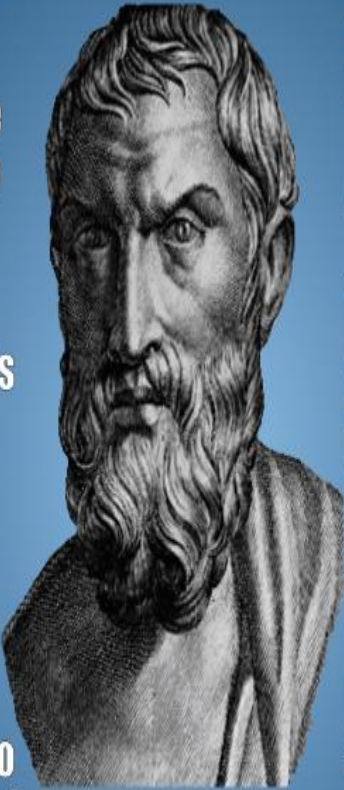
p. 168

Here's a sentiment I can fully endorse, and it might reveal a weakness of our presentation here at the forum. We need to find a way to clearly address Aristotle's teleology! If Lucretius' objection to what DeWitt calls "Purposiveness" in Nature is not of first-tier importance, as are those doctrines in the image below, then it certainly merits a place in any proposed second-tier list of doctrines.

Quote

The limited teleology at which Epicurus finally arrived had nothing to do either with creationism or adaptation of organ to function. It had nothing to do with the universe at large, which was ruled by natural laws. It had nothing to do even with animals, although animal behavior afforded evidence that pleasure was the end or telos of living. It was recognized, to be sure, that animals possess volition and that certain kinds of animals are actuated by innate ideas to organize themselves into herds for mutual protection, but only the rational human being was believed capable of intelligent planning for living and for keeping steadily in view the fact that pleasure is the end or telos ordained by Nature. This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

Norman Dewitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, page 67



Nothing can be created from nothing.

The universe is infinite and eternal and has no gods over it.

The nature of gods contains nothing that is inconsistent with incorruption and blessedness.

Death is nothing to us.

There is no necessity to live under the control of necessity.

Life is desirable, but unlimited time contains no greater pleasure than limited time.

He who says "Nothing can be known" knows nothing.

All sensations are "true."

Virtue is not absolute or an end in itself - all good and evil consists in sensation.

Pleasure is the guide of life.

By "Pleasure" we mean all experience that is not painful.

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2025 at 7:58 AM

Joshua:

1 - That question mark in the margin is the author, questioning himself? The issue of how to interpret Caesar's actions and the civil war of the time has always been very difficult for me to understand. So the author is supporting Caesar or not? The question of when a pre-existing constitution should be overturned is always sticky, but as the doctrines on Justice say, that which has ceased to be of advantage for the people involved is no longer "just." The part of the doctrines in the 40's that talks about the justice of nature being in agreeing not to harm is one

thing that is often emphasized in discussion, but those doctrines that say that agreements cease to be just when they are no longer of mutual benefit indicates that the label of "just" can change very easily. I suppose that's the ultimate way to evaluate Caesar's actions, not by an absolute standard but by the details of the time, which are very difficult for us to evaluate today.

2 - The non-purposiveness issue is something that ought to flow from the implications of the first and second and third of these statements, which are pretty much quotes, but they require some explanation to see that. I agree that the quote from page 168 is very good. Dewitt's summary is also good, especially "This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum." I agree that it would be good to emphasize this more. Are you aware of a pithy quote or near-quote that makes this point from Epicurus or Lucretius or Diogenes of Oinoanda? As it is, I'll probably modify the existing explanation of the statements in 1, 2, or 3 to include it.

Is the issue summarizable by referencing how the Stoics make Nature divine and essentially a god and imply that divine fire is intelligent, which is just step further than Aristotle's prime mover? I think we all agree that Epicurus rejects this as implications of what is stated in the principles of 1,2, and 3, but does he state this separately and explicitly anywhere?

in plain English, does it come down to the point that Nature is neither conscious nor intelligent and is not goal-driven?

Post by "Cassius" of March 14, 2025 at 8:03 AM

It would also be very interesting to get the full Bacon quote referenced in that excerpt from page 168, because I think there are lots of subtleties in that too.

One such subtlety is that the statement as quoted doesn't necessarily address the issue of whether the "final cause" is true. If in fact some supernatural force as a "final cause" does exist, then I am not entirely sure myself whether it would make sense to worry about the intermediate physical causes.

I can see a good argument that it's the fact that the supernatural final cause does not exist that makes knowledge of the intermediate physical cause particularly important.

Which means to me that it's really important to be clear and state the ultimate conclusion (that the final cause does not exist) as you are saying.

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 8:17 AM

I suppose one possibility would be the part in Lucretius where he talks about "Calling upon Neptune / Ceres if you like but don't be superstitious" (I'm remembering Humphries) Let me get that, but it probably goes to 2 and 3 and isn't exactly that nature is nonpurposive.

Note: it's from Book 2 and actually closer than I remembered (Humphries)

Let a man
Call upon Neptune, if he likes, say Ceres
When he means corn or wheat, miscall his wine
By an apostrophe to Father Bacchus,
Let him keep on repeating that our globe
Is the gods' mother - but let him, all this while,
Be careful, really, not to let religion
Infect, pollute, corrupt him. Earth indeed
Is quite insentient, has always been,
And as possessor of all particles
Sends many forth in many ways to light,
No consciousness about it.

Book 2 at 644 Bailey

[644] Yet all this, albeit well and nobly set forth and told, is nevertheless far removed from true reasoning. For it must needs be that all the nature of the gods enjoys life everlasting in perfect peace, sundered and separated far away from our world. For free from all grief, free from danger, mighty in its own resources, never lacking aught of us, it is not won by virtuous service nor touched by wrath. Verily, the earth is without feeling throughout all time, and 'tis because it has possession of the first-beginnings of many things, that it brings forth many in many ways into the light of the sun. Herein, if any one is resolved to call the sea Neptune and corn Ceres, and likes rather to misuse the title of Bacchus than to utter the true name of the vine-juice, let us grant that he may proclaim that the world is the Mother of the gods, if only in very truth he forbear to stain his own mind with shameful religious awe.

Post by “Joshua” of March 14, 2025 at 11:03 AM

Quote

2 - The non-purposiveness issue is something that ought to flow from the implications of the first and second and third of these statements

No, I don't think that is necessarily the case.

I don't have time for a full response, but consider the following statements;

1. You shouldn't wear clothes. Humans didn't evolve in order to need clothes.
2. You shouldn't drink cow's milk. Cows don't produce milk in order to nourish humans.
3. You shouldn't have sex outside of marriage. God didn't give us sex in order for us to enjoy the pleasure it produces, but in order to produce children within the context of marriage.

Only one of these claims presupposes the existence of a creator, but all three claims are teleological.

More on this later!

Post by “Joshua” of March 14, 2025 at 11:15 AM

Another way to put it; how does Lucretius justify the claim that 'the eyes don't develop in order to let you see'?

Aristotle makes a clear distinction between each of his five causes. The first cause, or prime mover, which you could say is God. Then four proximate causes;

- The material cause. What is it made of?
- The efficient cause. How was it made?
- The formal cause. What shape does it take? (Echoes of Plato and his forms on this one)
- And the final cause. Why was it made? What is its purpose? What end (telos) does its existence serve?

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 12:25 PM

As we discuss this it seems to me that we will want to be very clear what we are talking about. For example do we agree with this from chatgpt?

Teleology is the philosophical study of purpose or design in natural phenomena. It comes from the Greek words *telos* (meaning "end," "goal," or "purpose") and *logos* (meaning "study" or "reason"). In teleological explanations, events or objects are understood in terms of their intended purpose or final cause rather than solely their material or mechanical causes.

In classical philosophy, Aristotle distinguished four causes, one of which was the *final cause*, referring to the purpose or function of a thing. In contrast, modern science often rejects teleological explanations in favor of mechanistic or causal accounts, especially in fields like physics and chemistry. However, teleology remains relevant in areas such as biology (where functions of organs or behaviors may be described in terms of their evolutionary purpose) and ethics (where discussions of human purpose or the "good life" arise).

Epicurean philosophy generally rejects teleology, especially in a divine or cosmic sense, emphasizing that natural phenomena occur due to atomic interactions rather than serving a predetermined purpose.

Post by “Joshua” of March 14, 2025 at 12:50 PM

We can speak of four causes for the sake of clarity and limiting the scope of the discussion, but I don't think even Aristotle supposed there were only four. If the material cause of a table is the wood that it is made of, that answers to one of the proximate causes. But of course there are innumerable antecedent causes; the milling of the lumber follows the felling of the tree, which follows the growth of the tree, which follows the production of the acorn, and so on. But for Aristotle this can't go on forever; there cannot be an infinite regress of antecedent causes, so there must be an uncaused cause to start the chain.

The question (as raised by chatgpt) as to whether purpose-driven language should be used in biology is precisely one of the areas of contention. Lucretius seems to imply that it should not.

But in general I think that summary is ok. But we're not presenting Epicureanism to the professional philosophers of the world who already deeply understand these issues. We're presenting to other normal people like ourselves, and normal people use teleological language, probably without knowing it, in areas it maybe shouldn't apply.

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 1:19 PM

What do you think is the broadest statement of the principal that is still useful that we might look for in the texts:

- - that Nature has no purpose of itself?
 - - that the Universe has no purpose of itself?
-

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 1:52 PM

What we're talking about now is here in Lucretius Book Five:

Quote from Lucretius / Bailey

[823] Herein you must eagerly desire to shun this fault, and with foresighted fear to avoid this error; do not think that the bright light of the eyes was created in order that we may be able to look before us, or that, in order that we may have power to plant long paces, therefore the tops of shanks and thighs, based upon the feet, are able to bend; or again, that the forearms are jointed to the strong upper arms and hands given us to serve us on either side, in order that we might be able to do what was needful for life. All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use. Nor did sight exist before the light of the eyes was born, nor pleading in words before the tongue was created, but rather the birth of the tongue came long before discourse, and the ears were created much before sound was heard, and in short all the limbs, I trow, existed before their use came about: they cannot then have grown for the purpose of using them.

[843] But, on the other side, to join hands in the strife of battle, to mangle limbs and befoul the body with gore; these things were known long before gleaming darts flew abroad, and nature constrained men to avoid a wounding blow, before the left arm, trained by art, held up the defence of a shield. And of a surety to trust the tired body to rest was a habit far older than the soft-spread bed, and the slaking of the thirst was born before cups. These things, then, which are invented to suit the needs of life, might well be thought to have been discovered for the purpose of using them. But all those other things lie apart, which were first born themselves, and thereafter revealed the concept of their usefulness. In this class first of all we see the senses and the limbs; wherefore, again and again, it cannot be that you should believe that they could have been created for the purpose of useful service.

[858] This, likewise, is no cause for wonder, that the nature of the body of every living thing of itself seeks food. For verily I have shown that many bodies ebb and pass away from things in many ways, but most are bound to pass from living creatures. For because they are sorely tried by motion and many bodies by sweating are squeezed and pass out from deep beneath, many are breathed out through their mouths, when they pant in weariness; by these means then the body grows rare, and all the nature is undermined; and on this follows pain. Therefore food is taken to support the limbs and renew strength when it passes within, and to muzzle the gaping desire for eating through all the limbs and veins. Likewise, moisture spreads into all the spots which demand moisture; and the many gathered bodies of heat, which furnish the fires to our stomach, are scattered by the incoming moisture, and quenched like a flame, that the dry heat may no longer be able to burn our body. Thus then the panting thirst is washed away from our body, thus the hungry yearning is satisfied.

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 1:57 PM

In contrast to the idea that no teleological causes exist at all, however, how would we classify this from Torquatus:

Quote

[30] Every creature, as soon as it is born, seeks after pleasure and delights therein as in its supreme good, while it recoils from pain as its supreme evil, and banishes that, so far as it can, from its own presence, and this it does while still uncorrupted, and while nature herself prompts unbiased and unaffected decisions.

Does that amount to DeWitt's term of "teleology at a minimum."?

Some things, like hammers, are in fact shaped by intelligences, and it is appropriate to understand them based on the reason that they exist. So "teleological thinking" is not always wrong in itself, or is it?

What and where is the dividing line? And where if anywhere do we see Epicurus stating a principle of division?

Post by “Joshua” of March 14, 2025 at 2:35 PM

Quote

Some things, like hammers, are in fact shaped by intelligences, and it is appropriate to understand them based on the reason that they exist. So "teleological thinking" is not always wrong in itself

Absolutely correct! Humans are intelligent agents capable of ascribing purpose to their own creations. Nature is not.

Post by "Joshua" of March 14, 2025 at 5:03 PM

OK, I am off work. You have raised a number of excellent points and I agree that we need to refine this mass of material down to something digestible.

Relevant Texts

[All citations in this section are to translations by Cyril Bailey]

Epicurus, [Letter to Pythocles](#), sections 115-116;

Quote

The signs of the weather which are given by certain animals result from mere coincidence of occasion. For the animals do not exert any compulsion for winter to come to an end, nor is there some divine nature which sits and watches the outgoings of these animals and then fulfills the signs they give.

[116] For not even the lowest animal, although 'a small thing gives the greater pleasure,' would be seized by such foolishness, much less one who was possessed of perfect happiness.

All these things, Pythocles, you must bear in mind; for thus you will escape in most things from superstition and will be enabled to understand what is akin to them. And most of all give yourself up to the study of the beginnings and of infinity and of the things akin to them, and also of the criteria of truth and of the feelings, and of the purpose for which we reason out these things. For these points when they are thoroughly studied will most easily enable you to understand the causes of the details. But those who have not thoroughly taken these things to heart could not rightly study them in themselves, nor have they made their own the reason for observing them.

- The animals do not migrate for the purpose of changing the seasons,
- The seasons do not change for the purpose of moving the animals,
- And no divine mind has set these things into motion.

Epicurus, [Letter to Herodotus](#), section 64;

Quote

[64] Further, you must grasp that the soul possesses the chief cause of sensation: yet it could not have acquired sensation, unless it were in some way enclosed by the rest of the structure. And this in its turn having afforded the soul this cause of sensation acquires itself too a share in this contingent capacity from the soul. Yet it does not acquire all the capacities which the soul possesses: and therefore when the soul is released from the body, the body no longer has sensation. For it never possessed this power in itself, but used to afford opportunity for it to another existence, brought into being at the same time with itself: and this existence, owing to the power now consummated within itself as a result of motion, used spontaneously to produce for itself the capacity of sensation and then to communicate it to the body as well, in virtue of its contact and correspondence of movement, as I have already said.

This passage (and the subsequent passages as well, to some extent) is relevant because of the pains Epicurus goes to to avoid teleological language;

- The body, having come into existence with the soul, affords opportunity to the soul to experience sensation.
- The body, having afforded this opportunity to the soul, acquires its own share in this "contingent capacity" from the soul - that is, the body acquires its share in sensation.
- We can summarize this ateleological view in the following way: **the use of any natural thing is afforded by its existence, not the other way around.**
- By contrast, the existence of any artificial thing could be said to be afforded by its planned use. A table is brought into being for the purpose of dining. The human hand is pressed into service (say, of transferring food from the table to the mouth) only after it is found to exist.

The most important text, as cited by [Cassius](#) above, is Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book 5;

Quote

[823] Herein you must eagerly desire to shun this fault, and with foresighted fear to avoid this error; do not think that the bright light of the eyes was created in order that we may be able to look before us, or that, in order that we may have power to plant long paces, therefore the tops of shanks and thighs, based upon the feet, are able to

bend; or again, that the forearms are jointed to the strong upper arms and hands given us to serve us on either side, in order that we might be able to do what was needful for life. All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but what is born creates its own use. Nor did sight exist before the light of the eyes was born, nor pleading in words before the tongue was created, but rather the birth of the tongue came long before discourse, and the ears were created much before sound was heard, and in short all the limbs, I trow, existed before their use came about: they cannot then have grown for the purpose of using them.

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- "All other ideas of this sort, which men proclaim, by distorted reasoning set effect for cause, since nothing at all was born in the body that we might be able to use it, but **what is born creates its own use.**"

Further Reading

Norman DeWitt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*, page 67;

Quote

The limited teleology at which Epicurus finally arrived had nothing to do either with creationism or adaptation of organ to function. It had nothing to do with the universe at large, which was ruled by natural laws. It had nothing to do even with animals, although animal behavior afforded evidence that pleasure was the end or telos of living. It was recognized, to be sure, that animals possess volition and that certain kinds of animals are actuated by innate ideas to organize themselves into herds for mutual protection, but only the rational human being was believed capable of intelligent planning for living and for keeping steadily in view the fact that pleasure is the end or telos ordained by Nature. This amounts to saying that a nonpurposive Nature had produced a purposive creature, for whom alone an end or goal of living could have a meaning. This is teleology at a minimum. For such a belief no teacher had set a precedent.

Ian Johnston, [Lecture on Lucretius](#);

Quote

The poem's influence, according to Stuart Gillespie and Donald Mackenzie, can be linked to a range of twentieth-century poets and philosophers. So pervasive is its presence in the intellectual climate that for one critic at least (Stuart Gillespie) Charles Darwin's claim that he had not read Lucretius is rather like Milton's claiming that he had not read Genesis.

John Tyndall, [Address at Belfast](#);

Quote

Trace the line of life backwards, and see it approaching more and more to what we call the purely physical [54/55] condition. We come at length to those organisms which I have compared to drops of oil suspended in a mixture of alcohol and water. We reach the protogenes of Haeckel, in which we have 'a type distinguishable from a fragment of albumen only by its finely granular character.' Can we pause here? We break a magnet and find two poles in each of its fragments. We continue the process of breaking, but, however small the parts, each carries with it, though enfeebled, the polarity of the whole. And when we can break no longer, we prolong the intellectual vision to the polar molecules. Are we not urged to do something similar in the case of life? Is there not a temptation to close to some extent with Lucretius, when he affirms that 'nature is seen to do all things spontaneously of herself without the meddling of the gods?' or with Bruno, when he declares that Matter is not 'that mere empty capacity which philosophers have pictured her to be, but the universal mother who wrings forth all

things as the fruit of her own womb?' Believing as I do in the continuity of Nature, I cannot stop abruptly where our microscopes cease to be of use. Here the vision of the mind authoritatively supplements the vision of the eye. By an intellectual necessity I cross the boundary of the experimental evidence, and discern in that Matter which we, in our ignorance of its latent powers, and notwithstanding our professed reverence for its Creator, have hitherto covered with opprobrium, the promise and potency of all terrestrial Life.

[Note: the following areas (and more) need work]

Why is the question of teleology in nature important?

[]

How has evolutionary biology on the one hand and Abrahamic monotheism on the other changed how we talk about purpose in nature?

[]

Post by “Bryan” of March 14, 2025 at 6:12 PM

Yes clearly if there is a purposeful design there is a purposeful designer. In the Cratylus, Plato goes over how well formed language is, and agrees it must have been by purposeful design... and in the end he decides the purposeful designer did such a good job, that he must have been a god.

(Plato Crat. 438b)

"Socrates

How can we assert that they gave names or were lawgivers with knowledge, before any name whatsoever had been given, and before they knew any names, if things cannot be learned except through their names?

Cratylus

I think the truest theory of the matter, Socrates, is that the power which gave the first names to things is more than human, and therefore the names must necessarily be correct."

Post by “Cassius” of March 14, 2025 at 6:21 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

In the Cratylus, Plato goes over how well formed language is, and agrees it must have been by purposeful design... and in the end he decides the purposeful designer did such a good job, that he must have been a god.

I think we've talked about this before so my comment here is not a new observation, but this would go a long way toward explaining why Lucretius spends so much time addressing the formation of language - the issue goes right to the heart of whether there are supernatural intelligent forces controlling or guiding human life.